

TJ AITKEN TESTIMONY RE HB 5037

February 24, 2022

Good Afternoon Representative Walker, Senator Osten, and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee,

My name is TJ Aitken and I am the Young Adult and Family Services Manager at CCAR, which involves providing recovery support services to young people and families who are impacted by addiction and recovery from addiction. More importantly, I am also a young person in long-term sustained recovery for almost six years.

12 years ago, I was regularly using heroin at the age of 16. My mother desperately did whatever she could to connect me with the little resources that were available to someone like me. It was a seemingly hopeless situation. At 19, I entered prison, and again at 20. I went in and out of prisons and institutions for several years, repeating the cycle of detoxes and treatment centers more times than I can count. It wasn't until I was 22 that I found the gift of recovery in a 12-step fellowship and I have been sober ever since.

Today, I have a family, am an involved and engaged father to a 6-month-old girl. The life I live today is solely because of my recovery from drugs and alcohol.

My past struggles have afforded me the ability to help others who are just like me. As an emergency department recovery coach, I have seen thousands of people throughout multiple hospitals in the state, in their darkest hours. Those with private insurance have a wide array of options available to them. Those with Medicaid, or the young people who have yet to age into a system with bleak resources as it is, have little chances of finding recovery within the state of CT.

I was on the phone with a mother on Tuesday of this week. And I couldn't help but directly relate that to the same exact feelings my mother felt. She pleaded with me over the phone, asking for help finding treatment for her young son who is active in his opioid use, just like I was, and just like my mother did. My heart breaks for her as I tell her the only option is to send him to Rushford, for his fourth time.

I am asking the committee to consider increasing the DMHAS funding to help support young people finding recovery.

As the opioid epidemic rages, it has mercy for no one. Our young people are gravely affected and without the necessary resources, their chances are less than average. I can't help myself from thinking what if this was my child? What if this was your child? It is a sad state of affairs, as a parent, to plead with strangers over the phone in an effort to save their child's life

I would walk to the ends of the earth for my child, as I know any parent would. We need to do better for all of our young people that are struggling with substance misuse and seeking help.

Thank you for your time today, and I am happy to answer any questions.